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ABSTRACT

This paper, by the President of the Detroit Board of Education, discusses aspects of the school choice issue, providing examples from recent developments in the Detroit (Michigan) public school system. The paper argues that freedom of choice in an educational context is a critical right of parents, and that schools of choice offer the best opportunity for all children to get a quality education. Research studies indicate higher levels of student achievement, teacher morale, and parent involvement associated with school choice, and "choice" students experience significantly fewer problems in school. However, despite the recommendations of the Detroit Public Schools Parental Choice Task Force in 1986, the demand for additional schools of choice remained unmet after three years. Members of the community joined to form the HOPE Reform Team with the aim of changing the educational delivery system in Detroit. The HOPE campaign resulted in significant reconfiguration of the Detroit Board of Education and a mandate for educational change. Since his appointment, the transitional General Superintendent has accomplished a number of reform goals, including balancing the budget and winning support for additional taxes to finance comprehensive school system restructuring. The board's current plan calls for autonomous local schools administered by principals who are great leaders. The plan is designed to assure a structural change in how Detroit's children are educated and to assure educational quality throughout the Detroit district. (AF)

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ON WHY PARENTS NEED CHOICE
(AND WHAT'S TAKING SO LONG TO GET IT!)

One of the most unique--and fascinating--features about our country is the value we place on freedom. As the whole world knows, America was founded upon the principle that few things in life are more important, or sacred, than liberty--the right to be free.

In our history books, as well as in present-day conversation, we acknowledge some of the greatest Americans as those who dared to state that life without freedom is not worth living.

Perhaps Patrick Henry said it best when he stated, in 1775:

> "... Is life so dear or peace so sweet
> as to be purchased at the price of chains
> and slavery? Forbid it, Almightly God.
> I know not what course others may take,
> but as for me, give me liberty or give
> me death!"

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Now, more than 200 years later, we have indeed learned that liberty does not simply mean the freedom to be alive...or the freedom merely to exist.

For liberty--or freedom--to truly have meaning, it must provide for the freedom of choice in the pursuit of happiness; choice in the actual enjoyment of life; choice in the opportunity to share with others; and the freedom of choice to grow intellectually, learning all we can about the universe that surrounds us.

Without the blessings of choice, then, we are in danger of allowing "freedom" itself to become merely a hollow word no longer with meaning...no longer entitled to a place of value when the world describes this great country.

The benefits of being an American, then, clearly exist for us and our posterity when we are able to choose our enjoyment of the fruits of freedom. Thus, it goes without saying that we must be free to acquire the education necessary to make intelligent decisions about how we will exercise this inalienable right.

If we simply submit to a system which allows our children to be miseducated--or worse, remain uneducated, then we actually acquiesce to, or participate in, the worst type of slavery in Patrick Henry's nightmare: INTELLECTUAL IMPRISONMENT!

By not assuring the best possible education for our children, we deny them their God-given American right to be able to truly pursue happiness. And that's why parents need choice.

Surely, all good parents want quality education for their children. And, by good parents, I don't just mean rich or middle-class parents. I don't just mean parents who live in suburban America; not just employed parents, or college-graduate parents.

By good parents, I also mean all of the parents throughout this land who want--but don't know how--to acquire quality education for their children.

I mean all of the parents who have--or once had--hope that somehow, somewhere, their children would be able to experience the kind of quality education that every American child needs...that every American child deserves.

I mean all of us who want the best--the very best--for every precious child.

The next logical question, then, becomes: Do schools of choice really provide an opportunity for quality education for all children?

In finding the answer, let's examine my own family:

First, I have been a lay expert on choice for more than 25 years, having graduated from Detroit's premiere school of choice, Cass Technical High School--one of the finest schools in the world, then and now.

Now, my wife and I have four children who proudly attend schools of choice in Detroit, including my alma mater.

As a "choice" parent, I have served as president of the parent/teacher organization for my children's elementary school; as chairman of the city-wide organization monitoring all schools of choice in Detroit; and as a member of the task force exploring strategies to make even more schools of choice available to the many good parents in our district.

So, you see, I bring to this conference the experience practically of my entire life. Clearly, I have demonstrated a vested interest in--and commitment to--preserving and expanding the educational freedom to choose.

As a lay expert, then, I can confidently tell you that choice works. But please ... don't just take my word for it.

Examine any of the various studies which show that students who attend schools of choice achieve at a much higher rate than those who don't.

"Choice" students do not experience discipline problems at any significant rate; do not engage in vandalism; are not truant from school; and do not generally possess negative feelings about school--as do many of their less fortunate peers.

Research data also show that the level of morale among teachers is much higher in schools of choice than in traditional schools; and that parental involvement also is much higher.

Therefore, if, as we have established, being free in America means being well-educated ... and if all good parents want the best possible education for their children ... and if schools of choice offer the best vehicle for assuring quality education for all children ... why, then, don't more schools of choice exist?

This is, perhaps, the most important question that we must examine today. Because giving parents the right to choose means nothing if there are not enough choices--not enough good schools--to go around.

Let's face it, selecting between two failing schools does not really provide the choice for which our forefathers, such as Patrick Henry, put their very lives on the line.

So why, then, don't parents have enough quality schools from which to choose? Again, let me use my own experiences in Detroit to explain.

We members of the Detroit Public Schools Parental Choice Task Force prepared a comprehensive report which provided very clear and convincing evidence that an overwhelming demand for additional schools of choice indeed exists.

Our report held empirical findings which showed that students attending schools of choice achieve at or above national levels.

At the time the report was presented to the Detroit Board of Education, in 1986, there existed four (4) K-8 schools of choice ... and two (2) high schools of choice--in a district of 262 schools altogether.

Would you like to guess how many additional schools of choice have come into existence in the Detroit Public School System since that comprehensive report was issued three years ago?

Well, if you guessed that Detroit schools of choice have increased by tenfold, you would be dead wrong.

If you figured that a school system which already had experienced so much success with schools of choice--which was a leader in the nation with Cass Technical High School ... if you figured that Detroit would at least have established just six schools of choice per year since our comprehensive report was submitted--for a grand total of 18 out of 262 schools (only about seven percent) by now--then, again, you would not even be lukewarm.

Let me get right to the point.

Three years following the work of the task force on choice, and the release of a report which demonstrated that choice works in the Detroit Public School System, and that there was an overwhelming unmet demand for additional schools of choice, only two (2) more schools of choice have come into existence!

What this meant, then, for my school district is that we lost thousands of supportive parents who were forced either to pay tuition at a private school, or enroll their children at inferior neighborhood schools ... because of the unavailability of ample seats in classrooms at our unjustifiably few quality public schools.

What this meant, then, for my school district was that those good parents and students--who could have, and should have, been a part of our school population ... contributing their resources ... and sharing their knowledge--now were being systematically left out of our Detroit public school community at an alarming rate.

You may, or may not, agree with everything former Delaware Governor Pete DuPont says we must do to provide quality education for all children.

However, you would be hard-pressed to disagree with his suggestion that...if we are going to change the manner in which we educate our children, we're going to have to get about the business of doing it ... rather than continuing to talk and plan and think about how to do it.

In Detroit, some of us already were thinking along those lines. Thus came into being the Detroit "HOPE Reform Team."

HOPE--that's Frank Hayden, David Olmstead and me, Larry Patrick, for Education. Eventually, Joseph Blanding joined the group.

The four of us sat down, then, to analyze the best way to achieve our goal of changing the educational delivery system in Detroit. We agreed that the most dramatic method simply is to use what Joe Blanding calls the no-nonsense approach of ready, ~~aim and~~ fire!

First, we began with the realization that change of the magnitude required to assure that choice would become a real option, would have to begin on a grass-roots level.

We realized that the system could not be relied upon to change itself. In fact, we knew that the greatest resistance to change would occur from within the system...and not from outside.

So, we set about educating our community on just how much the Detroit public school system was failing when compared to similar communities across the state, and across the nation.

We reminded them of the high dropout rate, the crime and violence in the schools, the overall low achievement.

We challenged them to expect...and even demand...quality education for our children.

The community's response? They concluded that the members of the Detroit Board of Education who were up for re-election should not be returned to such positions of responsibility in light of their past failure to assure quality education for the children of our community.

As a result, we accomplished the historic overwhelming defeat of four long-term incumbents--all of whom were replaced by our HOPE reform team.

My unanimous election as president of the 11-member Detroit school board, after only ten days in office, provided further proof that district representatives had been put on notice: we parents want change, and we want it now!

For my closing remarks, then, let me share with you the steps we have, and are, taking in Detroit to assure that all parents will be able to exercise real choice in educating their children.

Upon learning earlier in this, HOPE's first year, that our school system's General Superintendent was prepared to step down, the next move we made was to go out and find the best person possible to lead our educational revolution.

Realizing the failures of the past for so many scho districts in America, we did not limit our search outstanding educators.

We added another crucial requirement: finding outstanding manager with vision who could see to it th great ideas would inspire great plans; and, ultimatel great results.

The person we were able to get, through the combin efforts of metropolitan Detroit's business, labor a religious communities, was the nationally-renowned retir president of Eastern Michigan University ... and form Michigan state schools superintendent ... Dr. John Porter.

A distinguished educator, outstanding manager and gre American leader, Dr. Porter responded to our plea for he by agreeing to serve as General Superintendent during o period of transition--thus enabling the entire Detro community to poise itself for greatness.

In fact, reviewing all of Dr. Porter's accomplishmen during just his first 100 days in office would leave y almost breathless!

In the interests of time, however, I'll give you small sample:

For the first time in ten (10) years, the Detroit Public School District has filed a balanced budget.

For the first time in recent history, we came to terms with our teachers' and administrators' unions before the start of school--without the intervention of a third party.

Less than one year after Detroit voters said "No!" to any new money for our schools under the former regime, they returned to the polls last month in overwhelming numbers to say "Yes!" in favor of John Porter's request to wipe out our $151 million deficit.

Our community also said "Yes!"--by a landslide--to Dr. Porter's request for additional taxes to target dollars for beginning the process of restructuring--of reforming--our entire school system.

All of this--and more--during his first 100 days!

And so, with this clear signal of support from the community, we are moving forward with a plan that is really quite simple.

We believe that each local school must have the authority and responsibility for educating the students centered at that school.

Of course, schools which have such authority will need to be led by principals who are great leaders. This is the challenge we now are addressing in our district.

Such schools, led by these great leaders, each will develop their own unique approach for educating their own students.

And, once these great leaders--aided in their decision-making by representatives of the faculty, parents, support staff, business, religious, and the human services communities--determine the best approach for educating the students at that school, then competition will exist among each of our schools.

It then must follow that parents will have to be free to choose from amongst the various schools based on the particular educational needs of their children--and not other relatively irrelevant factors, such as the location of the parents' home in the neighborhood.

Once we have completed this process of reform, Detroiters will not simply have choice for some children...or choice between inferior, and not-so-inferior, schools...or choice simply for the sake of choice.

Our plan is designed to assure a structural change in how we educate our children so that all schools in the Detroit district will be quality schools...prompting most parents then, to choose their own neighborhood schools--simply because they are the best schools.

Freedom to choose--that's what America really is all about. In Detroit, we hope to make our founding fathers of freedom, look down from the heavens, upon our fair city, and smile.

What price liberty? In Detroit, we plan to accomplish our mission the old-fashioned way: through hard work.

We intend to serve as a beacon of light for all parents in this nation ... because educational reform, schools of choice and hope for America's future--are here to stay.

Patrick Henry would have it no other way.

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